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ABSTRACT

Responses of four people to the book "Future Shock" are analyzed in relation to Erik Erikson's theory of personality. Results were interpreted as support for Erickson's theory and as illustration of how people interpret written language in terms of their own situations and life histories. In general, adults applied more detached and objective interpretations and sought meanings relative to a wider society. Adolescent responses tended to be more subjective and egocentric. Implications for reading instruction are briefly discussed. (AA)

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Practical Applications of Erik Erikson's Theory to College Reading Instruction and Interpretation

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Practical Applications of Erik Erikson's Theory to College Reading Instruction and Interpretation

Erik Erikson perceives personality to be the result of an epigenetic process involving a general sequence of biological, psychological and social events. The development of the personality is viewed as a continuous process with the successful solution of stage related crisis depending on environmental influences and personal initiative. Erikson refers to the "history of humanity as a gigantic metabolism of individual life cycles," and the external world as an extension of the many personalities which inhabit it. In his view, each personality absorbs the world as it experiences reality. Following this line of reasoning, one can view the reading experience as a means whereby a part of the world becomes a part of the self. As one reads, there is a fusing of personality with the content, and what emerges as interpretation is a reflection of the reader's personality on the writer's thoughts. Reading is thus an interplay between subjective and objective reality, and the resultant interpretation is a balance between the social reality surrounding the written selection and the level of psychological development attained by the reader.

Instruction, particularly reading instruction, can be made more individualized and more relevant if there is an insight into student's personalities. Yet, there is a limit to the amount of knowledge that can be gained about individual personalities in the brief span of a semester's work. Erikson, none-the-less, insists that it is possible to understand personalities if they are viewed not only as individual egos, but also as societal group members. Therefore, if students are seen as members of a social group who have experienced some of the same kinds of objective realities, we can point instruction in a direction which can maximize the benefits of individual subjective experiences. Responses to written language are a logical starting point in college reading instruction.

Thus, in an effort to ascertain the extent of the differences in reading interpretation between age groups in Erikson's developmental scheme and discover implications for college reading instruction, I chose four individuals representing three of the eight stages and asked them to read Future Shock, by Alvin Toffler. The respondents were a female 17 year old college freshman (late adolescence), a male 19 year old college sophomore (young adult), a female adult parent and a male adult educator and writer. All of these individuals represented middle-class families and the adults had earned post graduate degrees. Future Shock was chosen because of the wide appeal it has had to young and older adults and because it is required reading in many college classes. It deals with the rapidity of change in every facet of contemporary life and its effect on the human personality.

No attempt was made to prepare an empirical investigation, nor was there an analysis of the personalities of the respondents prior to the reading. Each person was simply asked to read the book and respond to a questionnaire containing four general categories of information.

Discussion

An interpretation of a written selection is influenced by the structure of one's philosophical position. Therefore, the first section of the questionnaire dealt with some of the general beliefs of the respondents as they pertain to changing value systems.

When asked to define values and determine their formation, the adult parent wrote that "a value is a fixed ideology that is transmitted to children by parents, teachers or other older adults. Though values are fixed at the time of transmission, they can change according to the needs of the individual in particular situations." The term "relative" was used in her discussion of the stability of values.

The college sophomore defined values as "societal norms or ideologies common to a certain group." He believed that values are built up over the years to become powerful" and that "they are derived from a philosophy shared by a group of people." Values, he says, "are not open to amendment, but certain life situations can cause them to be bent."

On the other hand, the college freshman insisted that values are not transmitted, but evolve from personal beliefs and are"dependent on one's judgment of a certain situation. Values are never constant, but change according to the situation."

The respondents' replies to the question of value formation supports Erikson's theory. The freshman, in the late stages of adolescence, exhibits the autonomous attitude characteristic of this age group as she relates her belief that values are formed independently of other people. However, the young adult and the older respondents cling to the belief that values are transmitted through a process of trust in others balanced by one's personal experiences. Those in the older age groups are less egocentric in their outlook than the adolescent and are willing to extend their horizons to include other people. It is thus possible for them to realize the influence of others on their own actions and beliefs. The adolescent has not reached this level of maturity.

The other question in the General Beliefs section focused on the repetition of historical events, identification of the age group more resistant to change and the receptivity to change among people associated with various cultural groups. The freshman and the parent believed that adults over 40 were more resistant to change while the sophomore and the educator pointed to those over 30. There were minor differences in the other responses.

The second part of the questionnaire dealt with individual interpretations of Toffler's hypotheses in light of personal philosophies. The purpose here

was that of unveiling the subjectivity with which the respondents read and interpreted the author's theories.

Toffler's main thesis is that we are living in an age of transcience characterized by fast turn-overs of personal relationships, material goods, occupations and ideologies. Erikson has posited that the human personality grows through specific stages with each stage influencing those previous and subsequent to it. It thus appears that the transcience of which Toffler speaks could have some effect on the normal progression of development. Respondents were asked to relate Toffler's transcience to sequential personality development.

The college freshman believed that the stage development concept is "outdated." Indeed, she felt that children are already beginning to "grow up faster" and stages of development are irrelevant to this increased movement. The college sophomore and the adults accepted the relevancy of the stage concept to development, but feared interruptions emanating from the rapidity of change. The parent wrote that "personality and cognitive development theories will have to be re-ordered in the face of this overwhelming im permanance."

Again, it is possible here to point to differences between adult and youthful interpretations. The younger person says that she is not threatened by accelerated change in the environment for she believes that children are capable of reacting according to societal demands. It is possible to note in her response the irritation she feels in the constraints of a developmental pattern. This, too, is consistent with Erikson's theory, for he writes: "Youth make a mutual plea for being recognized as individuals who can be more than they seem to be, and whose potentials are needed by the order that is or will be."[1]

However, when asked if Toffler's predictions will affect man's freedom

of choice, the adolescent displayed a fear of accelerated change. She believed that man will be forced to make fewer choices because the time element in accelerated change will not be sufficient for choices to be made. The college sophomore, on the other hand, insisted that choice will be accelerated to the "point of becoming painful." He referred to the "fact that many sociologists define the socialization process as one in which choice is restricted to acceptable behaviors." Therefore, he reasoned that while the future will increase freedom of choice for man, it may inhibit the socialization process.

The adult parent viewed Toffler's predictions as "accelerating the multiplicity of choice, but making the relative importance of such choices less."

The interpretation here, in the light of Erikson's theory, rests not with the acceleration or inhibition of choice, but rather in the reasons for a particular viewpoint. Actually, Toffler's changing society can be related to the many alternatives available to adolescents as they search for a true identity or to young adults as they seek intimacy and permanence amid changing relationships. Adolescents strive for autonomy, but are confused when faced with choosing alternatives. Indeciveness requires time and stability. The adolescent respondent sees change as being inhibiting to choice. In the midst of change, she seeks stability to allow more reflection on available choices.

In Toffler's description of the super-industrial society, commitments to institutions or organizations assume an ad hoc state. He views the man of this society as totally committed to his profession or particular vocation rather than the structure which houses it. Yet, all institutions and organizations differ in purpose and scope. Thus, as one moves to different environments, his own perspectives are necessarily caught up in a state of change. Respondents were asked to what extent this steady rate of change would affect the commitment of young people to ideologies and of all people to contemporary causes.

The college freshman believed that commitment would be impossible in both instances. The college sophomore foresaw a "superficial flow of ideologies through the minds of young people," but none of a lasting nature. He believed that people can commit themselves to contemporary causes with a single or series of related problems over a short span of time. The adult answers were somewhat different. The parent interpreted Toffler's hypothesis to herald an age when young people will cling tenaciously to ideologies because they represent the only stability in the face of so many changes. The educator believed that young people would "desperately band together with a separatism (often antagonism) from other groups in society."

The response of the college sophomore is typical of Erikson's analysis of this age group. He advances the theory that young people vacillate in their devotion to ideologies, but are seriously involved at any given moment. This commitment will occur regardless of environmental factors, for it is inherently a part of the developing personality. It is probably for this reason that college students respond positively to instruction that is relevant to their life experiences. The idealism with which they view the world can be used to advantage by the instructor who seeks to provide challenging educational experiences.

Many of Toffler's ideas imply that there will be changes in the ethics and morality of society as old values become irrelevant to the new technocracy. While Toffler equates morals to ethics, Erikson draws a line of separation between changing morality and changing ethics.

In their interpretations of Toffler's predictions of the future, all respondents believed that Future Shock represents changing ethics as well as changing morality. However, when asked if Toffler appeared to support Erikson's claim that hope, like fidelity, is basic to man, the young and older adults responded positively, while the college freshman offered a negative response.

She believed that Toffler paints a hopeless picture because "hope leads to satisfaction, and Toffler's society races so fast that satisfaction cannot be realized." This reply represents another instance of the older adolescent who is caught up in the search for identity and needs time and stability to settle the conflict. Satisfaction is the end result of a successful search.

Toffler makes several observations about education. One of the more shocking statements is that he views students as "information channels." Respondents were asked if they agreed with Toffler's idea or,if instead, students were filtering plants for new ideas. The differences in the replies of the younger people as opposed to the adults is clearly an expression of the effect of our institutions on students and their responses to these institutions.

College Freshman:	Students are not information channels; they are human beings. Teachers, however, think that they are information channels and are constantly trying to fill them up.
College Sophomore:	In today's educational system, students are channels with little chance for new ideas since ingenuity is often repressed, even at higher levels. The entire system inhibits new ideas.
Parent:	One begins by taking in information, but this is only part of the process. These ideas must be filtered in order to be productive. We cannot educate for the future by making our students depositories for old ideas.
Educator:	I think Toffler is perhaps most short sighted, even most ignorant when he talks about education. His information channel view is neither desirable nor realistic as an assumption about the future.

The responses to this question are an excellent example of how people interpret written language in terms of their own situations and life histories. The students are "enduring" the educational system while the adult respondents are involved on a different level. The students can relate only to what they are experiencing; the adults can see things as they should be.

The last part of the questionnaire solicited reactions to the book's format and content. There was a general agreement that the author's approach was straightforward and his use of language easy to comprehend. The book generated much more enthusiasm in the college sophomore than in the other readers. He wrote:

> I was intrigued, provoked, frightened and changed to a certain extent. It is strange how many changes have taken place since this book was written. It is part of an information landslide. This should be required reading for any social science in particular and people in general.

Conclusion

The responses of the readers in this inquiry support Erikson's theory of psycho-social development and its influence on perceptions of reality. It can be noted in most instances that the adolescent interpretations were more subjective than the adults'. This signifies the egocentricity of adolescence or the preoccupation of this age group with its own identity crisis. The young and older adults, on the other hand, applied more detached and objective interpretations to the reading as they sought deeper meanings relative to the wider society.

Future Shock deals with situations which affect all of our lives. Because of this, it was possible for the respondents to become intellectually and emotionally involved, though to different degrees. The same kind of involvement is needed by students in all that they read if they are to benefit from the experience. Those who accept the task of assisting students to further develop their interpretive capacities must use written language as a means of fostering retrospective, introspective and perspective thought. They should also be aware of the peculiarities of each developmental stage, for students shift in their thinking from one stage to another. In addition, instructors should be cognizant of their own psycho-social development; for their actions and reactions, too ,

are deep manifestations of their underlying personalities. Every instructional experience is an intrplay between these diverse personalities.

The contributions of Erik Erikson to our knowledge of psycho-social development can be invaluable in planning instructional strategies. An understanding of the socio-historical events surrounding an author's life leads to an improved comprehension of his published work. Students can gain this kind of insight by reading autobiographies and biographies of an author prior to the reading of a book or an article. It is also helpful to have students select a topic and compare the views of authors who have lived in different time periods. By doing this, students will realize the relationship of an author's views to the accepted social mores of a given time. As students share interpretations in the classroom, they become aware of the differences in the cultural heritage of their peers and of their instructor and the effect of this heritage on their perceptions. Finally, "talk" should be encouraged in the college classroom, for it remains the most effective and efficient means of promoting empathy and understanding.

There are many implications in Erikson's theory for college reading instruction, for it is only when reading instruction is focused on the lives of students and the dynamics of psycho-social development that it becomes relevant and meaningful. Reading must help a student understand his past, organize his present and plan for his future.

Note

[1]. Erik Erikson. The Challenge of Youth (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1965) P.15.